

Truancy and Zero Tolerance in High School: Does Policy Align with Practice?

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Abstract

High rates of student absenteeism and truancy are challenges facing many high schools. Zero tolerance policies are sometimes instituted to establish a clear understanding about expectations for acceptable and unacceptable student behavior. This case study provides a description of one high school's effort to evaluate the effectiveness of their policy for student chronic unexcused absences. An examination of the school's data indicated that course category, including basic skills-level and advanced placement, and earned grade were statistically significantly related to points deducted for unexcused absences. Little variation was indicated across grades based on unexcused absence groups, and truancy and grade point loss were equally distributed across all grades. The results indicated that the high school's zero tolerance unexcused absence policy appeared to be associated with increased point loss for students already failing and receiving instruction in the lowest academic level, with the majority of the students having IEP's and/or receiving free/reduced lunch. Recommendations and implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Truancy, Zero-Tolerance, High Schools

Approximately 9% of all U.S. students are absent from school everyday (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Generally, schools report two types of absences: excused and unexcused. Excused absences may occur for a variety of reasons, such as, illness, medical appointments, or participation in a sports activity. If a student

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is absent without being excused by a parent/guardian or the school, the absence is unexcused, and the student could be considered truant (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008). Chronic truancy is considered a status offense by the juvenile justice system in most states and subject to court petition (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005). Additionally, truancy has been linked to increased dropout rates, as well as other risk behaviors associated with behavioral disorders (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). Unfortunately, prevalence estimates of unexcused absences have limited utility because tracking and reporting practices by school districts have not been accurate (Henry, 2007). As a result, determining how many of the 9% of U.S. students with absences that were unexcused absences is difficult.

Since the 1970's research has identified risk behaviors associated with school absenteeism as including increased rates of substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and increased rates of court involvement (Brook, Lukoff, & Whiteman, 1977; Galli, 1974; Kandel, Treiman, Faust, & Single, 1976). Recently, Eaton et al. (2008) examined a sample of approximately 4,100 high school students, and found that students with more unexcused absences also had a greater likelihood of exhibiting elevated rates of risk behaviors, including physical aggression with peers and increased rates of regular substance abuse. To identify characteristics of students with increased rates of truancy, Henry (2007) examined a nationally representative sample of high school students and found that the rate of truancy increased with age/grade, and that students exhibiting increased rates of truancy were more likely to come from households where parents' education levels were low (high school or less), to have greater amounts of unsupervised time after school, and have poor grades and low educational aspirations. However, research has not identified causal pathways between truancy and risk behaviors. It is unclear whether truancy leads to risk behaviors, or risk behaviors lead to truancy, or the two are simply correlated.

As schools grapple with the difficulties of tracking and addressing truancy, interventions and policy approaches have been developed and implemented to decrease unexcused absences and increase school engagement. A number of programs and interventions have been developed for high school students to address absenteeism. Klima, Miller, and Nunlist (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of such programs and interventions targeting truancy, as well as dropout prevention, in middle and high schools for the Washington state legislature. To be included in their analysis, studies must have compared outcomes for students who participated in an intervention program with those of an equivalent control group. Overall, they

identified 22 research studies with a broad range of services, including mentoring, academic tutoring, case management, and alternative education settings. Findings indicated that targeted programs (e.g. mentoring, academic tutoring, etc.) positively impacted student outcomes, including school attendance, while alternative education setting-based interventions (i.e. students placed in separate buildings with specialized services) had a small negative effect on student outcomes, including truancy and school dropout. Overall, the meta-analysis indicated that there are a limited number of rigorous studies evaluating truancy programs, but of those, targeted programs (e.g. Check and Connect mentoring program) appeared to have the most positive effects.

An alternative approach to reducing truancy in high school involves policy augmentations. One such approach has been referred to as “zero tolerance,” which was first used in 1983 by the Navy with submarine crewmembers who were suspected of drug abuse. Ten years later, the policies were being transferred to school districts across the country for offenses related to drugs, weapons, tobacco, and school disruption (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Zero tolerance policies mandate “the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context.” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). To date, empirical knowledge about the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies within schools is limited. The American Psychological Association’s Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) found no evidence supporting the use of zero tolerance policies to increase attendance or school performance, and that minority students and students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders were disproportionately being over represented in zero tolerance-related infractions. As Farmer (1999) noted, zero tolerance policies may be acceptable for offenses involving weapons and illegal drugs to maintain safe schools, but application of those policies to minor student offenses may have negative effects on attendance, school performance, and dropout rates. Although research findings indicate no or negative effects associated with zero tolerance policies, the relationship between a zero tolerance policy and truancy has not been examined empirically.

A High School Case Study

In the fall of 2011, the administrator of a high school located in the Northeastern U.S. asked a university-based research center to examine attendance data and determine whether or not evidence would

suggest that their zero tolerance policy for unexcused absences was effective (i.e. whether the policy reduced unexcused absences). However, the lack of adequate longitudinal data limited evaluation of the policy's impact on the number of unexcused absences. Alternatively, the administrator wanted to identify whom the policy was affecting and whether or not it was disproportionately applied to certain students, particularly students at-risk for behavior disorders (e.g. exhibiting problem behaviors, such as truancy and low-academic performance). The administrator wanted to provide his superintendent with a thorough examination of the school's available data as a basis for evaluating the policy. With the request for assistance coming directly from the school, the case study provided a unique opportunity for a policy-relevant collaborative research effort between the high school and the university research center.

This case study evaluated the relationship between the high school's zero tolerance policy and patterns of unexcused absences by student grade-level, the type of courses students attended, and the grades the students received. For our purposes, zero tolerance policies required assignment of specific and strong penalties, such as grade point loss, for a specific problem behavior, such as unexcused absences, regardless of extenuating conditions or considerations. Although the post hoc analysis of a school-wide extant database provided the opportunity for a descriptive evaluation of a policy-based practice, no causal inferences were made, and a host of uncontrolled and unmeasured factors may have contributed to any patterns that might have been identified. However, as action evaluation research, the following specific questions were considered:

Did a relationship exist between grade level (9th, 10th, 11th, 12th) and unexcused absences/grade point loss for unexcused absences?

Did a relationship exist between course level categories and unexcused absences/grade point loss for unexcused absences?

Did a relationship exist between the students' unadjusted grade and their unexcused absences/grade point loss for unexcused absences?

Method

The High School

According to the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core Data, "Alpha High School" (pseudonym) had an enrollment of 1,197 students in grades 9 through 12 in the 2009-2010 school year.

As a rural and regional high school receiving students from six local townships, Alpha functioned as its own school district, and had its own school board and superintendent. The faculty consisted of more than 100 teachers, 5 administrators, 14 other faculty, and 27 noncertified staff. Approximately 95% of students graduated annually (5% dropout), 86.1% of students were white, 20.0% were identified as Gifted and/or Talented, and 15.1% had identified disabilities requiring special education supports. In the 2009-2010 school year, 12.1% of students received free or reduced cost lunch.

Zero-Tolerance Unexcused Absence Policy

The district's Board Policy Manual stated:

Students who do not attend class as scheduled and are not excused will be assigned an "unexcused" absence for the class. For each unexcused absence, students will be subject to a 1-point grade reduction for the semester grade and receive a zero (0) for all missed activities for the period. Students are encouraged to make up all missed assignments to continue the learning process.

Truancy at Alpha High School was defined as follows:

. . . any student five to eighteen years of age, inclusive, who has four (4) unexcused absences from school in any one month or ten (10) unexcused absences from school in any school year.

Data Source

A database of student records from the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years was used for this study. A brief description of each variable included in the study is provided in Table 1.

The dataset for 2009-2010 included 3,352 total records and the dataset for 2010-2011 included 3,556 total records. Records were defined as a single student within a single course. For example, if a student attended six courses per semester, that student would have six records per semester and a total of 12 records for the school year. A single student was observed multiple times across the school year; therefore, the unit of interpretation for the results is the mean within course, not the student-level mean absences or points lost.

Data Analysis Procedures

To address the three research questions, the courses were recoded using the following category levels based on descriptions provided

by the principal (e.g. approximation of the number of students with IEPs and receiving free/reduced lunch):

AD level = advanced courses taught at a local university

AP level = advanced placement courses outside the general curriculum

A level = the most rigorous academic level within the general curriculum with few if any students with IEPs and/or receiving free/reduced lunch.

B level = the middle academic level where few students have IEPs and/or receive free/reduced lunch.

G level = the lowest academic level where the majority of the students have IEP's and/or receive free/reduced lunch.

DI level = Direct instruction courses taught by special education teachers for special education students (typically for students with Intellectual Disabilities and other severe disabilities).

The research team could not empirically confirm the course category descriptions or the percentage/number of students receiving IEP services and free/reduced lunch in each course category independently. We only had the information provided by the principal. The percentage of students attending each course type was very similar in both schools years. About 1% of students attended the DI courses, about 13% attended the G courses, 72% attended the B courses, 12% attended the A courses, and about 1% attended the AP courses and the AD courses.

In addition, student course grades were recoded into numerical values for analysis of course grade means and inclusion in a regression analysis. Adjusted grades were recoded as follows: F equals 1, D- equals 2, D equals 3, D+ equals 4, C- equals 5, C equals 6, C+ equals 7, B- equals 8, B equals 9, B+ equals 10, A- equals 11, A equals 12, and A+ equals 13, while unadjusted grades were recoded as F equals 1, D equals 2, C equals 3, B equals 4, and A equals 5. The variables were coded differently because adjusted grades were used to describe the school, while unadjusted grades were used in the analysis and the range was reduced (i.e., removed +'s and -'s) for interpretive purposes. Lastly, course titles were used to code each course into one of the following course types: English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Science, Physical Education, Foreign Language, or an Elective, such as Choir, Band, Jewelry Making, etc. Again, the percentage of students attending each course type was very similar in both school years.

Table 1
Study Variables

Variable	Description
Student #	Unique student number
Student's Grade	Student's grade in school (e.g. 9 th)
Course Name	Course student enrolled in (e.g. Algebra II)
Earned Grade	Grade earned in the course
Adjusted Grade	Grade adjusted for points deducted
Potential Credit	Total credit possible
Number of Unexcused Absences	Total number of unexcused absences
Total Number of Absences	Total number of absences (excused + unexcused)
Total Points Deducted	Total number of points deducted for absences

About 13% of the courses were English, 22% were math, 22% were science, 11% were social science, 9% were foreign language courses, 10% were physical education, and 13% were electives.

As noted above, a student was considered truant when they received 10 unexcused absences in a single year. Therefore, three groups were developed based on that criterion (i.e. 10 unexcused absences as truant) and a researcher decision to further divide the data by 1 to 3 unexcused absences and 4 to 9 unexcused absences. These groupings were exploratory in nature and not empirically determined. Further, because these groups were exploratory, we did not use them in the subsequent regression analysis. Records (i.e. students within courses) were coded into group 1 if they had between 1 and 3 unexcused absences, into group 2 if they had between 4 and 9 unexcused absences, and into group 3 if they had 10 or more unexcused absences. It is important to note again that, although each record represented a single student, a single student could have more than one record per year because they attended multiple classes.

Once the variables were recoded, descriptive statistics were used to provide a general overview of patterns. The unit of analysis and interpretation was the course-level, with each student within each course recorded as a record. Descriptive characteristics included means, standard deviations, percentages, and cross tabulation percentages. Hierarchical multiple linear regression was used to identify the association between course category, student grade level, and

student unadjusted grade on overall grade point loss resulting from unexcused absences. Grade Points lost for unexcused absences was used because the number of unexcused absences was a count and would have necessitated a Poisson regression approach which was unnecessary as grade points lost could serve as a proxy measure and represented the outcome of unexcused absences. Hierarchical multiple linear regression was used to identify which of the categorical predictors accounted for the greatest amount of variance in grade points lost. All analyses were conducted in SPSS 19.0 software.

Results

The goal of the case study was to identify trends and patterns associated with grade-level, course category, and unadjusted grade with grade points lost as a result of Alpha High School's zero tolerance unexcused absence policy. During the 2009-2010 school year, a total of 9,209 individual absences were recorded, and of those, 3,241 were unexcused. During the 2010-2011 school year, a total of 29,353 absences were recorded, and of those, 12,400 were unexcused. The large discrepancy between school years was the result of over half the students in 2009-2010 having no unexcused absences recorded while every student in 2010-2011 had at least one unexcused absence recorded. Based on the available data, it appeared that a data entry error existed in the 2010-2011 dataset where students with no unexcused absences received a value of 1. This assumption could not be verified by the research team as the dataset was extant and, based on principal report, accurate for each year based on his knowledge. Therefore, the two datasets were analyzed separately for all outcome analyses. In the final analysis samples, unexcused absences accounted for approximately 35% of all absences in 2009-2010 and 42% of absences in 2010-2011.

Table 2 provides descriptive results for absences, grades earned, and grade points lost. Overall, student performance was stable across years, with an average school-level mean grade of C (6 = C) for all students across all courses. Interestingly, the grade point reduction and adjusted grades were almost identical, indicating that the mean level of grade point loss for unexcused absences was not different despite more unexcused absences in 2010-2011. This further confirms the potential data entry error and the decision to analyze the two school years separately.

The distribution of students across the grade levels was equivalent for both years. The majority of courses offered and attended at Alpha High School were B level courses, with an equivalent proportion of G level and A level courses. Few students attended the DI, AP,

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Interval Variables for Year 1 and Year 2

Variable	2009-2010		2010-2011	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	Max	<i>M (SD)</i>	Max
Total Absences	7.1 (5.8)	42.0	8.3 (7.0)	61.0
Unexcused Absences	2.5 (3.1)	37.0	3.5 (5.0)	58.0
Points Deducted	2.0 (2.8)	29.6	2.5 (3.4)	33.6
Grade Earned	6.1 (3.4)	13.0	6.1 (3.5)	13.0
Adjusted Grade	5.7 (3.4)	13.0	5.7 (3.5)	13.0

Numerical breakdown for adjusted grades: 1 = F, 2 = D-, 3 = D, 4 = D+, 5 = C-, 6 = C, 7 = C+, 8 = B-, 9 = B, 10 = B+, 11 = A-, 12 = A, 13 = A+

and AD courses. Math and science course offerings were the most prevalent.

Descriptive statistics for the overall number and percentage for each unexcused absence group for each school year are summarized in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The percentage of students with 10 or more recorded unexcused absences doubled from 2009-2010 to 2010-2011. This difference, again, may be a function of the possible data entry error between years.

Cross tabulations were calculated for each of the unexcused absence groups and each of four potential factors related to increased rates of unexcused absences (grade-level, course category, course type, and unadjusted grade). The percentage of students within each of the unexcused absence groups that recorded each of the factors hypothesized to contribute to increased rates of unexcused absences are summarized in Figures 3 - 8. In addition, χ^2 tests for each factor and unexcused absence group were calculated. Examination of grade-level trends indicated limited variation within groups, with the exception of the 10th grade group for 2009-2010 that accounted for over 30% of the 4-9 unexcused absences and the truant (10+ unexcused absences) groups. No consistent absence patterns were found in an examination of 11th grade trends for 2010-2011 (same group of students the following year). Interestingly, the χ^2 value was 20.92 ($df=6, p < .01$) for grade

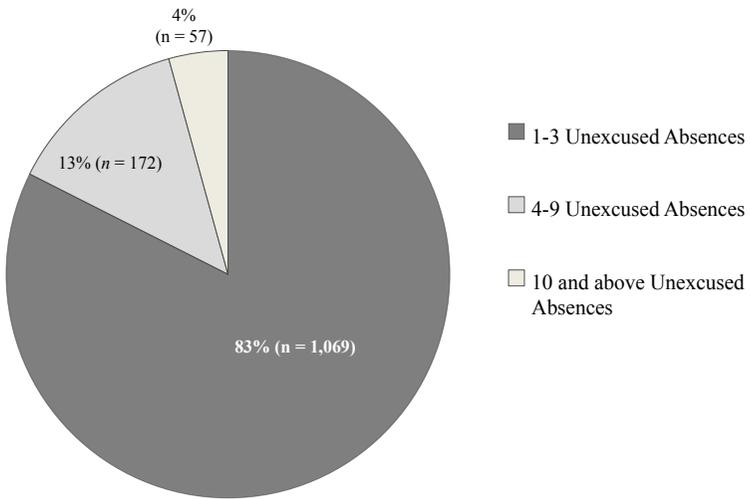


Figure 1. The percentage and frequency of students in the three unexcused absence groups in the 2009-2010 school year

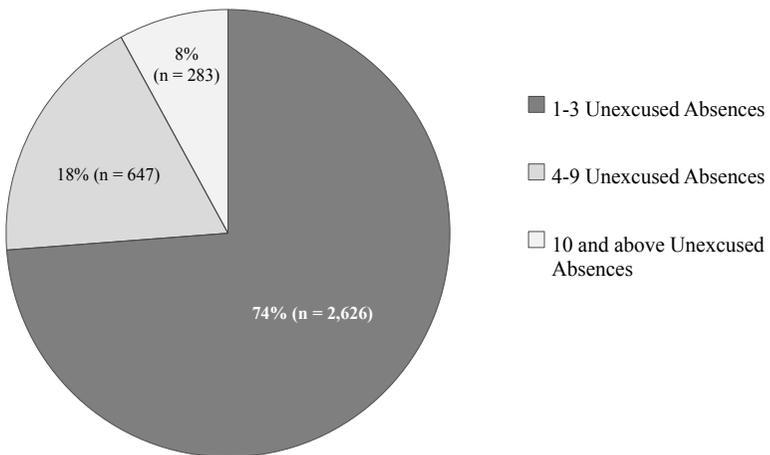


Figure 2. The percentage and frequency of students in the three unexcused absence groups in the 2010-2011 school year

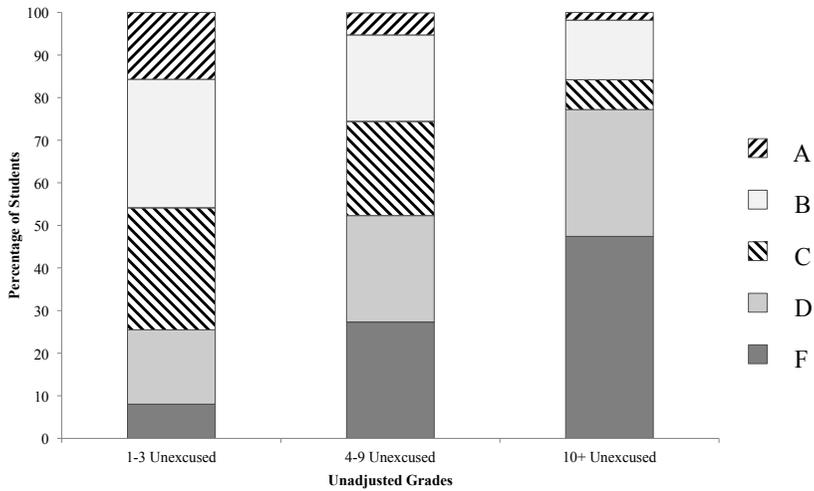


Figure 3. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Grade 2009-2010

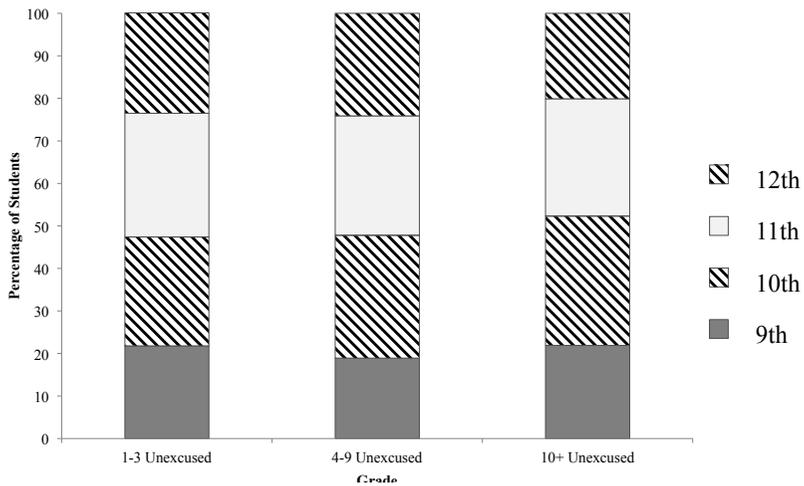


Figure 4. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Grade 2010-2011

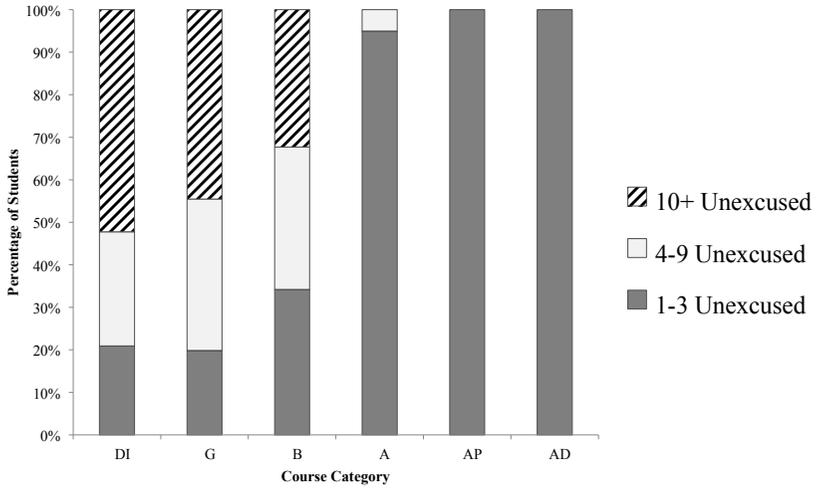


Figure 5. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Course Category 2009-2010

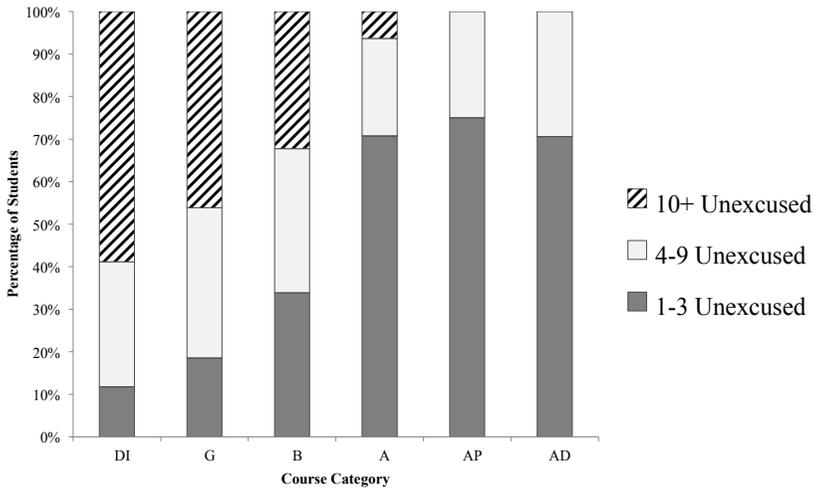


Figure 6. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Course Category 2010-2011

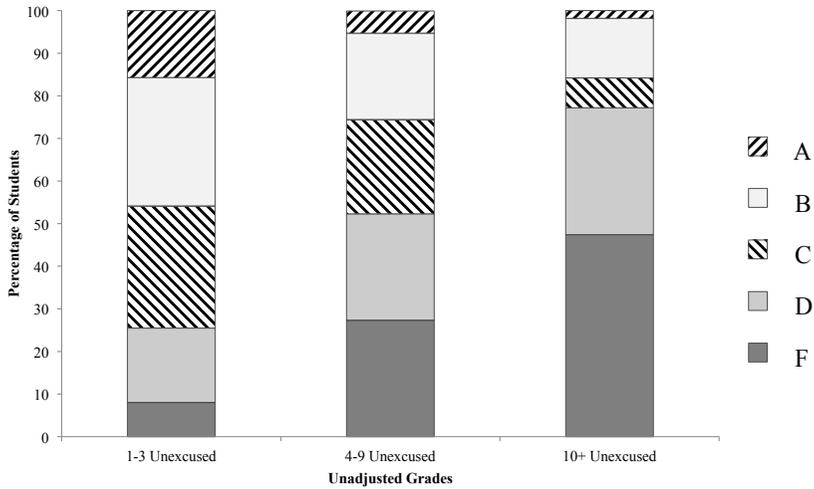


Figure 7. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Unadjusted Grades 2009-2010

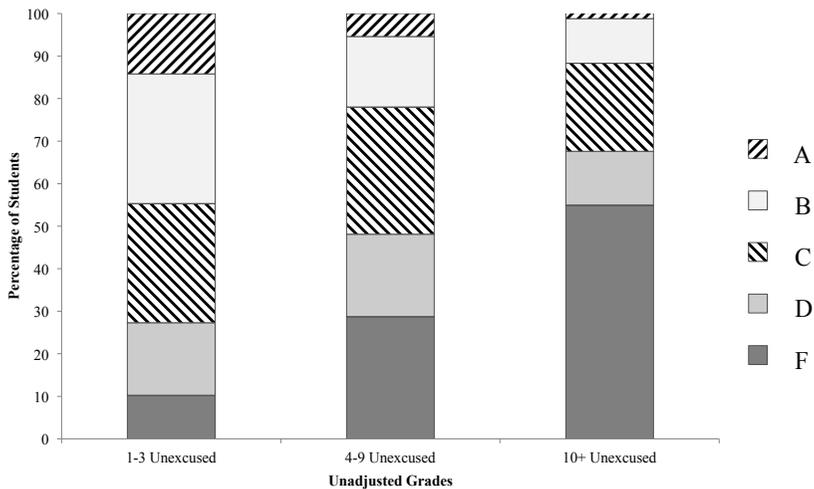


Figure 8. Percentage of Students in Unexcused Absence Groups by Unadjusted Grades 2010-2011

level (i.e. 10th grade) and unexcused absence groups in 2009-2010, but only 7.87 ($df = 6, p = .25$) for grade level (same students now in 11th grade) and unexcused absence groups in 2010-2011.

An examination of course category results indicated that no truant students attended AP or AD level courses, and in 2009-2010, no truant students attended A courses. Although the majority of truant students attended B level courses, a disproportionate number of truant students were represented in G level courses. As Table 2 indicates, 13.3% of all students attended G level courses in 2009-2010 and 14.4% in 2010-2011, while the percentage of truant students in G level courses was 28.1% in 2009-2010 and 27.4% in 2010-2011, which were almost double the expected percentages. For both years, the χ^2 values were statistically significant, with $\chi^2 = 50.05$ ($df = 12, p < .000$) for 2009-2010 and $\chi^2 = 182.22$ ($df = 12, p < .000$) for 2010-2011. Little variation related to course type was found, except that math was the course type in 2010-2011 with the greatest frequency of truancy. The results for course type identified no consistent differences between types for both years. There was no statistically significant difference between groups for 2009-2010 ($\chi^2 = 16.65, df = 14, p = .28$), however a significant difference was found for course type and unexcused absence groups for 2010-2011 ($\chi^2 = 44.16, df = 12, p < .000$) because of the increased instance of truancy in math during that school year.

Lastly, students' unadjusted grades (*before* grade points were taken off for unexcused absences) were examined within each of the unexcused absence groups. For both years, over 50% of truant students were failing the course *before* their grade was adjusted. In 2009-2010, 77.4% of truant students were failing their courses regardless of grade point loss for truancy. For both years, statistically significant differences were found, with $\chi^2 = 151.98$ ($df = 8, p < .000$) for 2009-2010 and $\chi^2 = 442.48$ ($df = 8, p < .000$) for 2010-2011.

Although four factors were hypothesized above as potential factors relevant to grade point loss, course type (e.g. science) was not included in the hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis. This variable was excluded for two reasons: no clear pattern of difference in the number of unexcused absences was apparent, with the only exception being math in 2010-2011 and, more importantly, 8.3% of the courses could not be categorized with the available information. The results of the hierarchical multiple linear regressions were similar across both years and indicated that all three factors were statistically significant, suggesting that differences existed within each factor, except for grade-level in 2010-2011 (Tables 3 and 4). However, based on an examination of the strength of relationship, course category was a better predictor of grade points lost than grade-level. The negative β

Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Summary
for Grade-Level, Course Category, and Unadjusted Grade
Predicting Points Lost for Unexcused Absences for 2009-2010

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²	R ² Δ
Step 1:				.002*	
Grade-Level	.103	.047	.040		
Step 2:				.046***	.045
Grade-Level	.192	.047	.073		
Course Category	-.956	.081	-.213		
Step 3:				.127***	.082
Grade-Level	.229	.045	.088		
Course Category	-.666	.079	-.148		
Unadjusted Grade	-.681	.040	-.294		

Note: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .000$

Table 4
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Summary
for Grade-Level, Course Category, and Unadjusted Grade
Predicting Points Lost for Unexcused Absences for 2010-2011

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²	R ² Δ
Step 1:				.000	
Grade-Level	-.048	.051	-.017		
Step 2:				.043***	.043
Grade-Level	.042	0.51	.014		
Course Category	-1.029	.085	-.210		
Step 3:				.130***	.087
Grade-Level	.116	.049	.040		
Course Category	-.731	.083	-.149		
Unadjusted Grade	-.761	.042	-.304		

Note: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .000$

indicated that as points increased, the course category decreased. In this case, DI level and G level were the lowest values (1 & 2) while A, AP, and AD levels (4, 5, & 6) were the highest categories. Students in DI and G level courses were more likely to have more points deducted because of unexcused absences. Based on the R^2 change value, unadjusted grade was the most powerful predictor, again with a negative β . Because F was scored a 1 and A scored a 5, the results indicated that students with very low unadjusted grades were more likely to lose points for unexcused absences.

Discussion

This case study was based on a high school administrator's interest in evaluating the effectiveness of his school's policy and procedures regarding student unexcused absences. Specifically, the study examined whether students' grade-levels, course category, or unadjusted grade were associated with unexcused absences.

In general, the results indicated that for both 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, grade-level was statistically significantly related to grade points deducted for unexcused absences (i.e. more points were deducted as grade-level went up), but descriptively, grade-level was not the most salient predictor. Little variation was indicated across grade level based on unexcused absence groups, with the exception of 10th graders in 2009-2010. Overall, truancy and grade point loss were equally distributed across all grades. This finding deviated slightly from those of Henry (2007), which found an increase in truancy with age.

Course category was examined to identify whether differential patterns of unexcused absences were present among the different categories of classes. The results indicated that students who were truant did not attend AP or AD level courses and that the majority of students who were truant attended G level courses. The hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis confirmed these results, but course category only accounted for approximately 4% of the variance after controlling for grade-level. More concerning, however, is that, according to the principal, students receiving IEP services and free/reduced lunch generally populated G level courses and, based on the results, may have been more likely to be truant.

Lastly, this study examined whether a students' unadjusted grade predicted grade points deducted for unexcused absences. Unadjusted grades were included to identify whether failing was correlated with truancy. Both descriptive characteristics and hierarchical multiple regression results indicated that students performing poorly or failing a course were more likely to be have grade points deducted for unexcused absences. Thus, students already failing a course were

more likely to have additional grade points removed for unexcused absences. However, it is important to note that the final model with all predictors only accounted for 13% of the variance.

Overall, although no causal relations should be inferred, the results suggest that the zero tolerance unexcused absence policy at Alpha High School was associated with disproportionate application to students who were in G level courses and already failing. In addition, students likely to be failing or on paths toward dropout were most likely to be penalized by the unexcused absence policy, meaning that they were more likely to be losing additional grade points on their course grade.

Although more refined student-level analysis are necessary to identify potential causal mechanisms associated with low-grade performance and dropout rates, an association between unexcused absences and poor grade performance was evident and consistent across both years studied. As noted in the literature (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008), zero tolerance policies may result in undue consequences for students in need of assistance and not affect the targeted behavior the policy was meant to address.

Limitations

A number of study limitations necessitate highlighting. First, a major concern was the apparent data entry error in the 2010-2011 dataset, which prompted validity concerns and necessitated separate analyses by year. Ideally, the research team would have been able to confirm the error and adjust the dataset appropriately. However, the research team was unable to confirm the concern and worked in good faith with the principal based on his knowledge of the process to develop a valid and reliable policy-relevant report. A second limitation was internal and external validity concerns. First, Alpha High School was unique in that it was semi-rural, but a small percentage of students received free/reduced lunch, indicating that those students generally came from houses below or well below the poverty line. Further, other demographic characteristics of the school (e.g. high percentage white, not Title I) limited generalizability to similar schools of similar demographic characteristics.

Internal validity concerns are raised due to the lack of baseline data to assess differences resulting from the school's zero tolerance unexcused absence policy and the inability to control for and assess student-level characteristic differences, including disability status, student-level SES, or a valid measure of behavioral performance. Therefore, all findings are relationships or associations and

not causal-links. This limitation does not negate the findings, but should provide pause in interpreting the strength of relationships.

Implications and Recommendations

As schools work to address chronic unexcused absences and truancy, the results from this case study, coupled with zero tolerance research findings, suggested that a zero tolerance policy approach may not address the problem, but instead be associated with other negative outcomes, especially for the population of students in need of the most help. As such, three broad recommendations are forwarded that may better serve the needs of students exhibiting truant behavior, particularly those with or at risk for behavioral disorders.

First, a preventive approach should be emphasized in which efforts are on (a) inhibiting the development of new (incidence) problematic unexcused absences (primary prevention) and (b) reducing the intensity, frequency, etc. of existing (prevalence) chronic unexcused absences (secondary prevention) (Biglan, 1995; Mayer, 1995). As such, a continuum of prevention-based interventions and supports should be established so that all students learn that attendance is expected and desired, and unexcused absences are problematic and undesirable. One potential approach is school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010), which focuses on establishing universal behavioral expectations. In high schools, attendance could be targeted as a universal expectation and students could be intermittently reinforced for meeting the behavioral expectation. If done with integrity and sustainability, most students might be expected to benefit (Walker et al., 1996).

However, for some students whose behaviors prove to be unresponsive to this primary prevention effort, more individualized and intensive supports could be provided. "Individualized and intensive" does not indicate more of the same, more aversive or punishing, or more exclusionary, but instead strategies that are more constructive, evidence-based, and unique to the learning and behavioral histories and characteristics of the student (e.g. targeted programs identified by Klima et al, 2009). One well-researched, systematic targeted intervention is Check & Connect, which has been widely used in middle and high schools settings (Christenson & Reschly, 2010). The goal of Check & Connect is to establish collaboration between an adult advocate within the school and the target student, which would focus on achieving specific academic and behavioral goals, including the reduction of truancy.

Second, because no two schools or districts are the same, no single strategy is likely to accommodate the unique ecological,

organizational, cultural, or historical features of an individual school. The second recommendation is to give priority to and establish a formal implementation framework that would establish the capacity to adapt the features and implementation of an evidence-based practice to a local context. To begin, an information system should be developed that focuses on the most important student outcome behaviors relevant to truancy (e.g. office-disciplinary referrals, in and out-of-school suspensions, unexcused absences, dropouts). A key step in building a valid and reliable data system is operational definitions for the student outcomes to be measured. One source of universally accessible and comparable operational definitions is the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Education Data Standards (CEDS). For example, CEDS provides a universal definition for unexcused absences as, "[a] student is not present at school or at a school-endorsed or sponsored activity without acceptable cause, parental knowledge, or authorization from the school administrator or his or her agent (retrieved from <http://ceds.ed.gov/elements.aspx>)."

The data system should be simple to implement and use and focused on questions that enable practice or intervention selection, action planning and professional development, based on the information collected within the school, primarily because no national norms for unexcused absences are available for intervention cut-points. One of the difficulties with this recommendation is building the capacity to analyze patterns for data-based decision making. The case study reported here demonstrated an example, no cost, research center-high school collaboration. The first author conducted the analysis as a service project for the high school. Where possible, we recommend that schools partner with organizations that can provide them with the data assistance to make informed data-based decisions.

Finally, priority should be given toward the identification and adoption of evidence-based practices that have demonstrated delivery of the same outcomes that have been identified by the school, which in this case would be evidence-based interventions targeting truancy. In addition to recommended interventions identified by Klima and colleagues (2009), specifically, targeted mentoring, advocacy, and academic support interventions, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) practice guide on dropout prevention (Dynarski et al., 2008) provides informative and helpful guidance schools can use to address truancy. Published Research has reported a high correlation between attendance problems (i.e., truancy) and dropout rates (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2005); prevention efforts aimed at reducing dropout rates are congruent and consistent with efforts to reduce truancy. The WWC practice guide provides recommended

evidence-based practices for schools to consider. To support school implementation, a compendium website with modules and practical support was developed and available on the Doing What Works website (http://dww.ed.gov/Dropout-Prevention/topic/?T_ID=24).

One recommendation forwarded in the WWC practice guide but not discussed above is providing access for students to academic coursework relevant to entry-level workforce skills. Evidence suggests that students exhibiting truant behavior, low academic performance, and other high-risk behaviors should be provided direct, hands-on experiences that prepare them for the workforce and emphasize the viability of postsecondary education options. By providing training and experience in entry-level workforce fields and partnering with local businesses, students may be encouraged to attend school because they are receiving relevant skills that will allow them to achieve greater employment opportunities than if they were truant or dropped out of school.

However, we want to emphasize that a simple “one size fits all” approach is not currently available and may not be preferable, and augmentations and adaptations to approaches may be necessary. Adaptations to interventions and practices based on collected data should consider contextual factors such as language, motivators/reinforcers, prior learning history, racial/ethnic backgrounds, community/neighborhood features, etc. For example, unexcused absences may result from different factors based on context. Students in one context may be truant for gang-related behaviors while students in another context may be truant for family or transportation-related reasons. The point is to consider contextual factors when developing interventions.

Taken together, these lessons and recommendations provide schools with guidelines and a variety of options and approaches to addressing truancy concerns. Existing research and results from this case study suggested that students exhibiting increased rates of truancy are in need of targeted interventions to increase their attendance in school. Zero-tolerance approaches to addressing truancy may not have the effect administrators’ hope, but instead may further encourage unexcused absence and eventual dropout. By considering the recommendations forwarded above, as well as those forwarded in the WWC Practice Guide, and working systematically to prevent truancy, schools may help those students most in need, and perhaps increase the likelihood that those students can and will complete high school.

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